

Spring 1-15-2007

## ENG 4763-001: Advanced Fiction Writing

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Bruno David Gallery

**English 4763-001  
Advanced Fiction  
Writing  
T TH 11:00-12:15,  
CH 3159  
Dr. Kilgore  
Fall, 2006**

## **General Information**

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** Further adventures in fiction writing, for those who have already survived (and been excited by) any one of the introductory creative writing courses. Students will be expected to assume considerable responsibility for defining and pursuing their own goals, submitting during the course of the semester either a novella written in installments or a series of at least three short stories. In addition a number of technical exercises and story-starters will be required early in the semester, plus a well planned class presentation on a story or author of your choosing. Readings will be fairly light, but must be done with excruciating care. As is usual in workshop courses, we will try to be open and accepting of what you are trying to do, but tough-minded and candid in assessing your degree of success. Be ready to write lots and lots, to revise obsessively, to speak your mind, possibly to go a little mad. (Group 6)

**INSTRUCTOR:** John Kilgore. Office: 3331 Coleman Hall. Hours: W 12-4; TTH 5-6:30; and by appointment. Also often here late Monday. Phone: (217) 581-6313 (office); (217) 345-7395 (home). Home page: <http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~jdkilgore> . Feel free to call me at home if you need to. I prefer that you **NOT** visit me with questions just before class begins; just after is fine. Feel free to email me at [jdkilgore@eiu.edu](mailto:jdkilgore@eiu.edu) ; if I don't have time to reply, I will say so.

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

- Attendance and participation (15%)
- Assigned readings.
- Oral report with teammates (10%)
- Story # 1 (25%)
- Story # 2 (25%)
- Story # 3 (25%)

I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages. There will be no final examination. If you wish you may work on a novella rather than writing three separate stories.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Bailey, *On Writing Short Stories* (B)  
Cassill, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction* (C)  
LeGuin, ed., *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* (L)  
Kingsolver, ed., *Best American Short Stories, 2001*.  
Miller, ed., *Best American Short Stories, 2002*.

**Please note the following:**

- In fairness to me and your classmates, **submit new work only**. Recasting old manuscripts that have been in your desk for years is an eminently worthwhile activity. But make this class an occasion for executing **new** projects, from start to finish.
  - If you are writing extremely brief stories, you should normally write more than three. See me to negotiate separate requirements and due dates.
  - If you are working on the novella option, submit portions of your novella in lieu of short stories on the first two dates, 2/1 and 3/6. Skip the 4/17 date, and give me the completed manuscript by T 4/24. The rewrite option will not be open to you, but you should feel free to ask me to read portions of the story at any point in advance of the final due date.
  - Two workshop submissions are required. The first will be your first submitted story (or first novella installment), and the second will normally be the second story or second installment you hand in on March 11. If you prefer, however, you may finish the third story or installment ahead of time and use that instead. See me to make arrangements for doing this.
- Remember to provide extra copies of workshop manuscripts.**

**ATTENDANCE.** I will take attendance at each meeting by passing around a sign-up sheet which you are responsible to find and sign. The resulting record will count for about 85% of your participation grade, on the following scale: 0-3 absences = A, 4 = B, 5 = C, 6 = D, 7 = F, 8 or more—continuing, proportional grade penalties (the attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade).

The policy is quite liberal, by design, allowing you to miss a week and a half of classes without penalty. Try to hold these allowed absences in reserve until spring break, using them only if you really must be absent. Then if you still have allowed absences

in the last weeks, you can use them, if you wish, to give yourself more writing time as you meet various deadlines. If illness or family emergency gives you a valid reason to miss more than 4 classes, see me to arrange for makeup work.

**PRELIMINARY WRITING.** During weeks 1-3, submit some kind of preliminary writing to me: a beginning, an ending, a sketch, or one of the suggested exercises below. Either e-mail or hard copy is fine. I will respond with a blunt assessment of what if anything seems to be working, and where I could see the piece going. My suggestions at this point may be fairly off the wall, and should not be adhered to dogmatically. If they strike a spark, fine; otherwise, ignore them.

**REPORTS.** In Week 2 you will be assigned two teammates, and the three of you will select a story or excerpt to present to us in Week 8 or 9. Your selection should be something that you are jointly enthusiastic about: a story or part of a story that seems to be an excellent model for the rest of us. The piece you choose may be literary if you like, or it may be frankly commercial; it can be a children's story, an avant-garde performance, a mystery, a love story. The essential thing is that you are excited about it and think it sheds light in some way on the common challenges of fiction writers.

Once you have chosen your story, it will be added to the syllabus as assigned reading, and a date will be set for your presentation. If the story is not included in any of our anthologies, your team must provide copies--an expense that should be fairly modest when shared three ways. We will read the story or excerpt in advance, and you should plan a discussion that proceeds on that basis, with a minimum of plot summary. Keep the reading selection to reasonable length--nothing much more than a short story--and the presentation ditto (about 25 minutes). It's always nice if you know a little background on your author. Tell us what other works (if any) by this writer you have read, which you would recommend most heartily, and what you find especially admirable in him or her.

Finally, though, your chief focus should be on the work you have assigned to us. Discuss the story or excerpt in some detail, telling us what you find admirable, what particular writing lessons you find, what is especially memorable and worthy of imitation. In doing this you will of course touch on such conventional concerns as plot, character, and theme—but do remember that this is a writing class, not a literature class. Be sure that you and your teammates have some kind of plan for how the presentation will proceed. Incorporate class discussion if you like, deciding which of you will act as moderator. There will be a single grade for the team, assigned to all three presenters; e-mail me afterwards if you want to find out what it is.

Can't think of an author you want to do? See the end of the syllabus for a list of suggested authors and works. Too broke to make copies for us? Choose a story from one of our five anthologies.

**STORY GRADE** (75% of course total). For short story writers, will equal the average of the three short-story grades, with the rewrite grade (if any) replacing the initial grade on a rewritten story. For novella writers, grades on installments will be provisional and advisory; the final grade will be given on the completed manuscript.

**GRADING STANDARDS.** Are of course hard to define in a creative writing course, but probably less so than is commonly believed. Your stories will be subject to no *a priori* requirements as to form, content, or genre, but should be—quite simply—the best work you can do, and will be subjected to vigorous critical analysis by your classmates and by me. We will try to judge each story according to its own implicit aesthetic goals and standards, and I assign grades "holistically," according to my best judgment of a story's overall artistic success. By this I mean success *as written*; I try my best to read the story that is actually there, not the one that potentially could be. Details matter, readability counts, and I assume a confident control of grammar, spelling, and punctuation; if you still have trouble at these levels, this may not be the course for you. Start your stories early, get feedback as needed, and make sure you have fixed everything you can before the story reaches us in workshop.

Other things that make a story good: fresh observation; strong characterization; realism; strong voice; appeal to the senses; mastery of form and technique and genre; emotional appeal; intellectual appeal; truth to life; truth to fantasy; economy; candor; skepticism; creative madness; strangeness. There is no way to put all these things on any kind of quantitative scale, but we all know, mostly, when we have read a good story.

If you're worried about your grade—you really shouldn't be, in a course like this—but if you are, do notice that the rewrite option, the attendance grade, and the report grade all have a tendency to push the final grade up late in the semester.

**COPIES AND MANUSCRIPT FORMAT: READ CAREFULLY!** Due to budget constraints, you will be responsible for providing copies of your stories for workshop discussion. When you hand in a story for workshop, provide one copy for each class member, including me, plus a couple of extras. When you hand in a story that will not be in workshop, one copy will do. But be sure to keep at least one copy of anything—even a very rough draft—that you hand to anyone else in the course.

**On stories handed in for workshop, you may single-space and use 10- or 11-point fonts;** but leave 1" margins and skip an extra space between your single-spaced paragraphs (as in the document you are now reading). Do **NOT** make a "special" double-spaced copy for me; I want to be reading from the same copy as everyone else. These departures are permissible because they will save you copying expense; but **on stories not distributed to class, follow usual practice, double-spacing and using 12-point fonts.**

**LATE WORK.** I will be fairly flexible if you get in touch with me **before** the missed deadline and have good reasons for being late. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from "B" to "B-") for each day late, weekends and holidays included. **DO NOT** expect me to grant extensions at the end of the term, as it may be impossible for me to read late work in time to file final grades.

**WORKSHOPS.** Some quick thoughts on what makes a workshop productive: first, sweat like the dickens over your own fiction, getting it in the very best shape you can before we see it in workshop. A weak effort is not only embarrassing to you, but demoralizing to others. Second, take your obligation to your fellow writers very seriously. Come to workshop extremely well prepared, with comments you have given

some thought to. Be an extremely conscientious critic whenever you are called upon, rigorous but generous, meticulous but open minded. Never be dismissive of the *kind* of thing a story is (or wants to be), but be a clear-sighted judge of how well it has met its own implicit goals. Make an extra effort to define what a story is doing well—because that tends to be strangely hard to do— but then feel free to address problems candidly and unapologetically. Never give or take criticism personally, and never hesitate to point out the supposedly trivial editorial issues.

**NETWORKING.** I hope that in this class you will feel very free to ask for one another's advice on drafts before handing in the final draft for workshop. I will circulate a list of telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. Don't be shy; decide whose advice you would like and ask for it. If you are asked to comment on your classmates' drafts—even if you are asked repeatedly—feel flattered, not put upon. You will probably be learning more than anyone else.

**MISCELLANEOUS.** I will be more than happy to make reasonable accommodations for any student with a documented disability. Please contact me if you will need such an accommodation; or call the Coordinator of the Office of Disability Services, 581-6583.

Please be aware that the penalty for deliberate plagiarism will be automatic failure of the course. See me if you have any questions about this policy.

## SCHEDULE

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Note: Be on the alert for changes; check the "Current Assignment" window online regularly. Please complete readings assigned for any session **before** the class meets, and try to read workshop stories well in advance of the meeting.

### OVERVIEW

|                     |                               |   |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Weeks 1-4           | Introduction                  | Various readings. Submit drafts and scraps. Preliminary writings. <b>Story # 1 due TH 2/1</b> |
| Weeks 5-8           | First Round of Workshop       | Meet with teams to Prepare Reports. Story # 2   |
| Week 9              | Reports                       | <b>Story #2 due TH 3/6</b>  |
| <b>Spring Break</b> |                               |   |
| Week 10             | Reports                       | Story # 3   |
| Weeks 11-14         | Second Round of Workshop      | <b>Story #3 due T 4/17</b>  |
| Week 15             | Presentation of Final Stories | <b>Novellas and Optional Rewrites Due, T 2/24</b>   |

**1) January 9, 11**

Course Introduction: In-class storytelling.

Updike, "A & P," B 211. Adams, "Barcelona," C1. Minot, "Lust," C381

**2) January 16, 18**

Sign up for teams for reports.

T: In-Class Writing

TH: Story structure: the nature of narrative.

**Preliminary writings and drafts (optional).**

**3) January 23, 25**

T: O'Connor, "Everything that Rises Must Converge," B171. Sterling, "We See Things Differently," L762.

TH: In-class writing.

**Preliminary writings and drafts (optional).**

**4) January 30, February 1**

TTH: [Readings]. Class read-aloud.

**Story # 1 due on Thursday. Provide multiple copies for workshop**

**5) February 6, 8**

Workshop

**6) February 13, 15**

Workshop

**7) February 20, 22**

Workshop

**8) February 27, March 1**

Workshop

**9) March 6, 8**

**REPORTS; readings TBA.**

**Story #2 due from volunteers. Provide multiple copies if you want this one in workshop.**

**SPRING BREAK, MARCH 11-15**

**10) March 20, 22**

**REPORTS; readings TBA.**

**Story #2 due on Tuesday. Provide multiple copies if you want this one in workshop.**

In-class writing & exercises

**11) March 27, 29**

Workshop

**12) April 3, 5**

Workshop

**13) April 10, 12**

**STORY #3 DUE ON THURSDAY**

Workshop

**14) April 17, 19**

**NOVELLAS DUE ON THURSDAY**

Workshop

**15) April 24, 26**

**OPTIONAL REWRITES DUE ON TUESDAY**

In-class presentation of final stories.

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**SUGGESTED AUTHORS AND STORIES FOR REPORTS****From B:**

Anton Chekhov, "The Lady With the Pet Dog"

James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"

Cynthia Ozick, "The Shawl"

Tim O'Brien, "The Things They Carried"

**From C:**

Margaret Atwood, "The Man From Mars"

Charles Baxter, "Snow"

Robert Coover, "The Babysitter"

Louise Erdrich, "Saint Marie"



Charles Johnson, "Kwoon"  
William Kotzwinkle, "Follow the Eagle"  
Amy Tan, "Rules of the Game"  
John Updike, "The Other"  
Tobias Wolff, "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs"

### **From L:**

James Tiptree, Jr., "The Women Men Don't See"  
Eleanor Arnason, "The Warlord of Saturn's Moons"  
Ursula K. Le Guin "The New Atlantis"  
Joanna Russ, "A Few Things I Know About Whileaway"  
Greg Bear, "Schrodinger's Plague"  
Eileen Gunn, "Stable Strategies for Middle Management"  
Paul Preuss, "Half-Life"  
Margaret Atwood, "Homelanding"  
Diane Glancy, "Aunt Parnetta's Electric Blisters"  
John Kessel, "Invaders"

### **Other classic stories you might want to track down:**

Isaac Asimov, "Nightfall"  
Ambrose Bierce, "The Boarded Window"  
Ray Bradbury, "The Small Assassin"; "Twilight"  
Raymond Carver, "Where I'm Calling From"  
John Collier, "Witch's Money"  
William Faulkner, "Spotted Horses"  
John Gardner, "Redemption"  
Ernest Hemingway, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"  
Jack London, "To Build a Fire"  
Norman Mailer, "The Man Who Studied Yoga"  
Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been"  
Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People"  
Saki, "The Interlopers"  
Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Gimpel the Fool."

### **Suggested Exercises and Story Starters**

**1)** In the first person, write a reminiscence of a time, a place, or an action that comes from at least five years back in your past. Make the reader aware of the lapse in time that separates the narrator speaking "now" and his or her other self back in the past. Feel free to fictionalize and invent.

**PURPOSE:** To heighten awareness and control of point of view; to

practice turning the self into a character; with luck, to make contact with some material that will become a story.

**2)** Sketch from direct observation two or three people you do not know, concentrating on physical details. Then invent a plausible personal background for one of them, fantasizing as freely as you like.

**PURPOSE:** To heighten powers of direct observation and skill in description; to practice seeing the connection between physical appearance and underlying personality.

**3)** Write the first sentences of ten different stories. No cheating: JUST the first sentences. Let at least an hour pass before you go back and try to develop any of the beginnings. **OR:** Do last sentences instead; or five first, five last.

**4)** With a tape recorder or, preferably, a small child as your audience, tell from beginning to end a story you invent as you go along. Then write an entertaining, readable 500-1000 word version of the story.

**PURPOSE:** To stimulate imagination; to teach the value of getting on with it—of not agonizing over details till you're ready; to get a feel for narrative structure.

**5)** Visualize a moment of intense grief, shame, or emotional hurt from your past. Then sketch the moment as fully and thoroughly as possible without ever once making direct reference to any emotion, or relying on obvious physical cues (tears trickling down cheeks, long sighs, etc.) to evoke it. Concentrate instead on capturing the way powerful feeling shapes the perceptions of the physical milieu, and on the way specific memories and odd thoughts go whirling through the mind at such moments. The point is not so much to make the reader "guess" the feeling as to "show rather than tell." Let the sketch begin to turn into a story if it seems to want to.

**PURPOSE:** To appropriate the energy of strong emotion without being swamped by it; to teach the importance of objectivity, distance, and restraint; to practice selection and use of expressive detail.

**6)** From the point of view of a detached, third-person narrator, sketch a character who is either a) the person you wish you could be; or b) the person you fear you may be or may become--the worst side of yourself. Include physical and other detail, and illustrate key points with narrative instances. If you find the sketch turning into a story, so much the better.

**PURPOSE:** to practice characterization; to stumble on a story you may need to tell.

**7)** Write a dialogue of about three pages, including: a) sections of heavily tagged interchanges; b) sections in which there are few if any tags; c) sections in which you include, "for effect," the sorts of trivial remarks that are normally left out of dialogue; d) sections in which the reader will realize that words have passed between the characters that

have not been quoted word for word; e) sections in which the characters say highly significant things to each other, but in an oblique way, i.e. without flatly stating what they mean.

**PURPOSE:** To learn that good dialogue is not a literal transcript, but a highly selective and artfully molded take on what was said.

**8)** Write something in which you deliberately try to shock the audience. **OR:** Either confess to or narrate the commission of some shameful act, in a tone which should no doubt seem, given the foulness of the deed, shockingly cold-blooded. Let the sketch be detailed, but avoid corny overemphasis of such obvious attention-getters as gore or unsheathed body parts.

**PURPOSE:** To build courage, or anyway that peculiar variety of it that writers need.

**9)** Depict something you know well: a technique for scaling bass, strange speech habits in your own town, the best way of pissing off your mother-in-law—anything about which you are more or less an expert.

**PURPOSE:** to learn the effectiveness and importance of "insider's knowledge."

**11)** Without knowing in advance what will happen, create a *scene* in a place you know well. You may write in third, first, or even second person. Begin by rendering the place itself, with sharp detail and strong appeal to the senses. Then describe the characters who are there in the particular "now" or frozen moment you have chosen to describe. Then start the clock by having someone speak or act. With luck you may have stumbled into a moment that really is significant in the lives of one of the characters, and your story is on its way.

**PURPOSE:** To practice visualization and the difference between scenes and narrative passages; to stumble into a story.

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